

The Materiality of the Past

Anne Murphy, *The Materiality of the Past: History and Representation in Sikh Tradition*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2012, xiii + 309 pp., ₹1245.

DOI: 10.1177/0257643015585676

Sikh studies have predominantly been oriented towards textual analyses of the tradition. The metanarratives of these studies singularly posit the emergence of this tradition from the core Sikh texts, which too have been a matter of polemical debates regarding their authorship and authenticity. There are also complex dialectics of these debates in regional, national and transnational spaces, each influenced by the physical contours of its location. Most recent academic interventions have tried to surpass these limitations. The broader spectrum of these interventions intends to open an enquiry into the meaning of Sikh tradition, its cultural contours and its relationship with *Punjabiyat*. This cultural turn in the understanding of the Sikh tradition has thus opened a foray of research into the performance and practice of religious tradition.

The book under review by Anne Murphy is a significant addition to this emerging scholarship on Sikh tradition, which is deeply embedded in the region of its origin, practice as well as its transnational environment. This multilocality of Sikhism problematizes the standard assumptions about sovereignty and territoriality. The book is divided into three sections. In the first section, Murphy tries to foreground the theoretical concerns around memory, history and materialities in

the Sikh tradition. The second section is an exploration of writings on community, history and sovereignty from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The third section engages in a discussion on the history of possession and debates on gurdwara reform and Sikh identity in the twentieth century that informs the former in significant ways. The concluding chapter posits the community, territory and the object in transnational environments.

Murphy begins her discussion on ‘belonging’ and ‘attribution’ with a controversy on the auction of a steel armour by Sotheby (London) in 2008 that possibly belonged to the tenth Sikh Guru, Guru Gobind Singh; it was gifted to the royal Patiala family by the Guru himself and is said to have featured his verse called ‘Akal Ustat’. These forms of memory and history, the relationship between objects (housed in the imperial collection or *toshkhānā* of Ranjit Singh at Lahore) and Sikh sovereignty, were perceived dangerous by the British. Murphy defines these objects as ‘relics’, symbols of reverence and belief and proof of the existence of something that Sikhs believe in: ranging from *pothī* and *rahit* (texts), clothing, shoes, chariots and weapons. Objects thus symbolize emotions, blessings, memories and a deep connection to the Sikh past that is experienced, proved, narrated and performed for a transnational religious community as well as gurdwara—a latticework of memory-making cultural forms.

Murphy views Sikh interest in history as the mise en scène of modernity, mobilized for the political present in both academic and popular discourse, ‘where claims of historicity have been determined by conflicting notions of history, identity, and civil and property rights within colonial and postcolonial contexts, and are deeply embedded within contemporary power struggles’ (p. 8), but yet located in the discourses produced in the pre-colonial contexts, out of a range of memorial forms. Additionally, textual representations and materiality (objects and sacred sites) existed as part of a single conceptual field, the latter augmenting and not replacing the textually defined narrative that dominated the formation of the Sikh community (p. 12). Thus, it becomes crucial to explore the past in relation to the present and analyze the ways in which memorial practices and forms of historical representations associated with the Sikh tradition have been transformed from the early modern through the colonial periods, and its manifestation in the contemporary moment.

The eighteenth century is particularly crucial as a period of transition, from a period of charismatic leadership of the human Guru to the primacy of the text, and the nineteenth and twentieth centuries redefined and substantiated the notion of sovereignty, identity and Sikh territory. At this juncture, the logic of representation shared between object (*itihāsik*/historical relics) and site (*itihāsik* gurdwara) breaks down, and even though both remain a part of the community’s past experience, they embody two alternative perspectives towards the past and present: a deterritorialized one and a territorialized one. This book’s pre-eminent concern is not so much with the Sikh past but with the forms of its representation, ‘why they have taken such forms, what they constitute to be and what they have produced’ (p. 19). Significantly, these ‘representations of the past embodied in textual historiography are supported by evidence that the relic and site provide a part of a single historiographical project’ (p. 25).

Relics and sites thus act as objects of memory ('absent original') which materialize and 'enliven' the history of the community through boards on display, pamphlets and oral accounts. This public engagement with the historical objects and sites thus provides evidence of a narration of the past into the religious present (p. 36). Objects with private individuals, for instance, in the possession of the Dalla family, the Sodhis of Kartarpur or the Bhalla family, though not part of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee-managed institutional sites, are nevertheless marked as a part of the visitor's experience. Essentially possessed (using the cultural vocabulary of *khil'at*) as gifts by the Guru himself and hence embodying his 'power', they reflect both politics in relation to state formation (for instance, legitimacy to sovereignty in relation to Ranjit Singh and Phulkian states) and the politics of community building. 'Memory thus fuels history, constitutes it; even as the two are distinct, they are linked' (p. 45).

Murphy's discussion on major Sikh literary (*gurbilās* and *rahitnāme*) genres of the eighteenth century, Sainapati's *Gur Shobhā*, Chaupa Singh's *Rahitnāmā* and Kesar Singh's *Baisāvalīnāmā*, posits these texts as types constituted by memory-making for 'articulating and remembering an authorizing relationship with the Guru' (p. 105). 'It is in the post-Guru period, in the face of the transfer of the Guru's living authority to text and community, that memorial linkages to the Guru were transformed and emphasized, to bridge the gap brought about by the end of humane Guruship', and 'satisfied particular theological and social concerns of the Sikh community in its self-identity formation' (p. 108). These concerns become more apparent in relation to a continuously unfolding present of the nineteenth century, and hence Santokh Singh's *Srī Gur Pratāp Sūraj Granth*, Rattan Singh Bhangu's *Prācīn Pāñth Parkāsh* and Bhai Vir Singh's novel, *Sundarī*, reveal diverse, though not essentially oppositional, articulations of Sikh identity. The memory of and relationship with Guru Gobind Singh is crucial in the articulation and substantiation of Sikh sovereignty in most of these texts. Bhangu wrote in response to the accounts on the Sikhs provided to the British by non-Sikhs, and hence articulated both nostalgia as well as the anxieties of Sikh's golden age as a result of British ascendancy over Punjab.

This culminates in a discussion on Bhai Vir Singh's articulation of Sikhism and its *des* (territory) in a 'modern' Khalsa idiom tied to the imagination of the 'nation' and articulating the contours of Sikh identity. *Sundarī* thus provides a transition point for the production of the community and manifests in the polemics of gurdwara reform in the twentieth century. This transition was, however, intimately connected with colonial agrarian transformation, the significant changes in the rule of property and its relationship with religious sites.

The fight for Sikh control of *gurdwaras* thus represented the culmination of a transition in the making of the historicality of place in the Sikh imaginary, in relation to a new kind of colonial (agrarian) territoriality and a new sense of the logic of ownership by and for the community. (p. 184)

The designation of the Darbar Sahib as the property of the Khalsa body, the way the community is defined as a cohesive whole, as owner. This kind of religious articulation

with reference to the land contributes to the ways that the landscape of Punjab was territorialized as Sikh. (p. 186)

In addition to territoriality,

the larger questions of identity within the colonial frame (civil–military alliance, war effort and the privileging of the Jats) were thus central to the question of *gurdwara* reform, and to the designation of the community of right, in relation to the religious site, as can be seen in other parallel situations in colonial India. (p. 211)

‘As a result of the Movement, these sites changed in their meaning, functioning and relationship with other elements of Sikh life, and particularly with the state’ (p. 219). Thus, even as these sites were being ‘created’ out of a prior set of meanings and functions, they came to be imagined in particular legislative and juridical ways within the administrative discourse of the colonial state. ‘History, place as property, and Sikh identity were thus joined in defining the territory of the community’ (p. 230). Objects were secondary (deemed private) to this formulation and the property, particularly landed property, was made central, also through colonial mapping. But objects occupy a vibrant transnational religious life, eliciting multiple notions of sovereignty not tied to territory but museologised and manifested in the globalised Diaspora community, signifying ‘multiplicity of materialities’.

Murphy thus provides a compelling narrative articulating an interplay of different processes of memory and history-making, which materializes and enlivens the territoriality of Sikh tradition. However, it remains to be seen whether her defining constant of ‘Khalsa’ can sustain relevance in the diverse setting of Sikh identity where, for instance, a living Guru continues to be significant. It is also important to problematize the ‘striking consistency’ argument in the presence of broader evidence and the lived experience of a narrative that often overlaps and transcends the perceived boundaries of Sikh identity. Also, while Murphy enlarges the meaning of Sikh tradition through her analysis of objects and sites, she overestimates the argument on ‘those in attendance’, because it again discounts the lived practices of Sikhs whose presence continues to define the landscape of *derās* and popular Sufi shrines in contemporary Punjab. Thus, the Sikh experience continues to be shaped by multiple intersections of both religious as well as temporal contours of ethnicity, where native and familial ties, caste, local community and urban and rural landscapes play equally important roles in defining contemporary religious experience. The current discourse around the takeovers of *itihāsik* gurdwaras is also significantly defined by the considerations of political economy where religious tradition becomes secondary. Further, the museumization of objects in a transnational environment does not necessarily deterritorialize sovereignty, particularly in the context of Khalistani discourse, where the rhetoric of memory and sovereignty over Punjab as a territory reverberates in the politics of Sikhs vis-à-vis the Indian state. Nevertheless, Murphy’s historiographical enquiry into Sikh tradition opens up fascinating

possibilities for a nuanced understanding of materiality, memory and history in the religious traditions of South Asia.

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Y. Subbarayalu, *South India under the Cholas*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2012, Preface + i–xiv + 274 pp., ₹675.

DOI: 10.1177/0257643015585677

Professor K.A. Nilakanta Sastri's magnum opus, *The Cholas*, in two volumes with an appendix for each, was first published in 1935 and 1937 by the University of Madras. The work at once established Sastri's status as arguably the greatest historian of early south Indian history. Subsequently, the text was 'carefully revised, and in part rewritten' by the learned author himself, and the revised edition was published as a single volume without an appendix by the university in the year 1955. Such was the reputation his work commanded that till the last quarter of the last century, his reconstruction of the Chola history was viewed by the fraternity of historians as virtually the last word on the subject.

This comforting and contented situation however received a jolt, particularly in the 1970s, through the writings of a number of historians, mainly from North American universities, who were questioning Sastri's reconstruction of Chola history more on theoretical and less on empirical grounds. The leading light of the team, so to say, was Professor Burton Stein, whose work, though provocative and controversial, was a sweeping study on the pre-modern history of south India.¹ In his book, Professor Stein had attempted to deconstruct the structure of the Chola state and society as erected by Nilakanta Sastri, and in order to do so, he effectively used, among other things, an innovative research work that had been done by a young researcher on the political geography of the Chola country, which had been published in 1973 by the Tamil Nadu State Department of Archaeology.² That young researcher was Professor Y. Subbarayalu, who had, in a sense, slipped into historical studies armed with a bachelor's degree in mathematics. Additionally, in the early 1970s began his long academic association and collaboration with Professor Noburu Karashima, whose contribution to the study of pre-modern south Indian history has been outstanding. For more than four decades now, Professor Subbarayalu has been carrying out sustained and painstaking research on thousands of inscriptions of the Chola period and regularly publishing the fruits of his labour in the form of research papers.

¹ Burton Stein, *The Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1980).

² Y. Subbarayalu, *Political Geography of the Chola Country* (Madras: State Department of Archaeology, Government of Tamil Nadu, 1973).